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## *The Idylls and the Ages*



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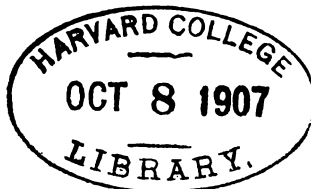
**The Loyls and the Ages  
A Valuation of Tenny-  
son's Idylls of the King &  
Elucidated in Part by Comparisons between  
Tennyson and Browning  
By  
John Franklin Genung  
&**

**Thomas Y. Crowell and Company  
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## Preface

THE primary aim of the ensuing pages is neither eulogy nor criticism, but what Walter Pater has taught us to call appreciation; that is, a disinterested endeavor in sympathetic and constructive spirit to answer the question how the *Idylls* look to-day, after twenty-one years' life in the completed form of an epic cycle has given time, and the detachment that comes with time, the warrant so to separate their large and permanent values from their initial glammers that they may come into whatever matured rights are their due,

"And orb into the perfect star  
We saw not, when we moved therein."

In committing this study to writing, I have availed myself of an occasion, to fulfil a virtual promise of long standing.

The occasion was a request from the Browning Society of Boston, whose programme for the winter of 1906-7 was "Browning among the Poets: a Year of Contrasts and Comparisons," to read them a paper on Tennyson; which I accordingly did, on December 18, 1906. This will in part explain why so much of the valuation of Tennyson is carried on by way of comparison with his brother-poet; a procedure which, so far from confusing the inquiry, proved, once embarked upon, to be perhaps the most lucid and fundamental approach to my specific theme. It

**Preface** gives, further, good opportunity to note how remarkably these two great contemporaries of the nineteenth century divide the dominating movements of the manhood spirit between them.

The promise, made to the present Lord Tennyson in the year after the poet died, has remained all this time more or less in meditation but unfulfilled; partly on account of other intervening duties, and partly because, with me, time and its tempering insights seemed necessary to bring that just view and proportion of things which a poem that had been intimately enmeshed with my youthful enthusiasms demanded.

"Wait: my faith is large in Time,  
And that which shapes it to some perfect end,"

wrote Tennyson of one of his searching experiences. It behooved the student of his most cherished work to wait until he could write for a generation to whom Tennyson's captivating poetry had not been a daily education. For the rest, the judgment is now in the hands of my readers.

Amherst, Massachusetts,  
January 27, 1907

## ***The Idylls and the Ages***





THE IDYLLS AND THE AGES

i

Spiritual Dynamic in the Age's Poetry

**A**MONG the unseen powers that watch over the spiritual ongoings of the time, whether subtle phases of natural selection or of the divinity that shapes our ends comes to much the same thing, we must not fail to reckon that apportioning oversight which so adjusts a poet's style to his message that the latter acquires on the whole just about the welcome and momentum it ought to have. A message implies a mission; and of this every earnest poet is aware. By the very fact that he sees so clearly and feels so deeply he is the conscious vehicle of a propaganda; to him it is all-momentous that others should see and feel as he does. How far then, we his readers respond, ought his propaganda to prevail? How much of the opulent and crowded life of man should his particular pulsation of truth draw into its orbit? The answer to this question we may read pretty accurately, if we have insight, in the inexorable terms of his style; which like a monitory muse has whispered to him, "Hitherto shalt thou come, but no farther."

To test the truth of this, take for instance Walt Whitman, who as a child of Adam to

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

whom there is no differentiation of parts comely or uncomely, so insistently sings himself. How much of that amorphous elemental self of his, as it were the raw material of personality, does a civilized world need to assimilate? We open his book, and essaying to read find his style as unorganized as his message, and we get his range and trend as well from a specimen as from the whole; so after noting the drift of his melody most readers are content to leave him singing; coming back occasionally, perhaps, to see how things are getting on, as he leans and loafs at his ease, observing a spear of summer grass. They get in that way about all of the primordial self and of the average democratic man that they have practical use for. Take again George Meredith, with his cryptic note of an all-subduing naturalism, as it were the poetic circulation of evolutionary potencies through the veins of personality. Surely, it would seem, we ought to heed this mystic deduction of science and enrich our vision of life thereby. And we do,—as far as his words and images, so crowded with laborious involvement, will let us. But the tension of mind needed to keep along with him has its fated limits, and its assimilating vigor runs out just about where the momentousness of his propaganda does. Take once more Swinburne, whose song of native freedom, colossal in mature import yet in his spirit all too unmotivated, is well-nigh lost, by the time it reaches our heart and will, in a deliquescence of verbal music. While we are trying to keep in tune with the elabo-

rate fugal melody, the untamed freedom has somehow become tamed and diffused, and the message has wrought its intrinsic net result of applied energy. So it turns out to be, as matter of cold fact, with poet and prophet alike, as they court the suffrage of their fit audience. Of each, in his individual stroke, the age whom he would evangelize can say, as Tennyson said of the sharp impact of sorrow on his be-reaved heart:

"Likewise the imaginative woe,  
That loved to handle spiritual strife,  
Diffused the shock thro' all my life,  
But in the present broke the blow."

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*In Memoriam  
1850. 14*

In every poet's style there seems to be a tempering element, not so much to cause a shrinkage of effect as to break the immediate blow of his message and diffuse the shock through the common life of the age so that it will work not singly but in fit equilibrium with the countless other impulses to which it is subject.

The examples I have given must perhaps submit to be minor and sporadic. The net residuum to which each reduces, as compared with what a full-furnished age needs, will sufficiently indicate why this is so. A more widely operative example, and more cardinal, may be adduced: the example of the two dominating poets who, singing side by side through so many growing years of the last century, set the prevailing pace of poetic utterance and appreciation. What would have been the vital dynamic in the age, I found myself asking the other day, if Browning's robust and audacious mes-



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

sage had been conveyed in Tennyson's wizard artistry; what, if Tennyson, for his more guarded and cautious propaganda, had borrowed Browning's raucous voice? An unthinkable alternative this, of course, given the fact that the style is the man; but for once let us essay to think the unthinkable, and uncover the heart of the two brother poets in a new idiom.

Here, on the one hand, sings a bard who in virtual aim is the vigorous advocate of sheer headlong aggressiveness. In effect Browning will deny to manhood no native proclivity or passion; his final ideal is to conduct the imperious human spirit through all the deeps and sloughs of life until at the end it reaches

*A Death in the  
Desert, 631*

"the ultimate, angels' law,  
Indulging every instinct of the soul  
There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing."

To one who, like Hamlet, sees "his naked spirit how majestic," such is the culmination of things. In pursuance of this ideal Browning fears not to trust all feeling equally; hearing all sides; rejecting nothing in the tremendous gamut of souls, from Caliban and Sludge and Blougram and Guido Franceschini, with all the dirt of animality or perverted motive that clings to them, up to the saintly Pope, at the height of long-ripened wisdom, and David, at the summit of the prophetic insight of love, and Abt Vogler, at the mystic point where the emulous heaven yearns down to claim shares in his art, and the dying St. John, at the ethereal table-land of intuitive spiritual values. Everything discernible in the sum-total of manhood

must have its due, a proportioned due of up-  
building, furnishing, reaction, probation. So  
momentous is each element, positive or nega-  
tive, that evil almost disappears, as it were a  
thing of nought or silence implying sound.  
Nay, even the lowest depth of ruin is boldly  
faithed as

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"that sad obscure sequestered state  
Where God unmakes but to remake the soul  
He else made first in vain."

*The Ring and the  
Book, l. 2123*

How shall a halting dim-seeing age be edu-  
cated to bear such an audacious, not to say  
perilous, exposition of life?

Here, on the other hand, occupying his com-  
partment of the same English mind, sings the  
brother poet whose music moves equably and  
tunefully in the bounds of law and custom;  
whose constant pressure is on the restraining  
brakes of prescription, order, proportion, tem-  
pered reflection; whose congenial region, of  
spirit as well as of politics, is a land

"Where Freedom slowly broadens down  
From precedent to precedent."

*Don Ask Me Why*

If the sweet tenor of his song is broken, as it  
indeed sometimes is, rising almost to the shriek  
of hysterical discord, it is only at his sense of  
the age's effrontery of evil. So sensitive is he to  
every lawless breath that to his ideal it would  
seem that primal instinct and proclivity merit  
scarce any free play at all, and the elemental  
man is metamorphosed into the cultivated and  
conventional man. On every side of his mes-  
sage one gets a prevailing impression of checks

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

and balances, subtle elements of caution, regulation, solicitude, sane and sober repression. A needed curb this, doubtless, for a too headstrong age; but how shall it be made viable and pervasive where it is most needed?

What now, reverting to our question, would have been the effect of the reversed conditions, style and message?

With the endowment of that permeating charm, that captivating music, which made Tennyson "England's voice for half a century," would not Browning have been too perilously armed? Would he not have been a subtler Lord Byron, not sowing lawlessness broadcast, indeed, like his predecessor, but far more insidiously honeycombing the nation's too ready heart with a kind of anarchic insolence? Tennyson, on his side, wielding Browning's blunter and less gracious weapons, would have made little headway in making his cautious spirit prevail. He would perhaps have been as dull as a pedant, or as hard and unbenignant as a scold. The too obvious truisms of law and order, the uninspiring levels of conventional morals and sentiment, are not kept vital in that way.

As the matter actually stands, however, the divinity that shapes a generation's ends has looked out for the fitting adjustment of things. And we can trace this adjustment, in appreciable degree, to a thing so simple as the strain of poetic style, with its fated reaction on the reader. Browning, the common minds say, is hard reading; hard, but as we dwell with him, abundantly rewarding and stimulating. We



must work for what we get. He is not a poet of the sofa or the hammock. And in the end our intellectual energies, laboring with him, are and have to be so sharpened, and at the same time so justly tempered as to accord his message the meet and balanced reaction. We can safely indulge the spiritual instincts he has at heart, instincts no longer headlong and heedless, by the time they have passed through such a crucible of athletic cerebration. By that time too, it must be owned, though we have no call to be Pharisaic over it, we become aware that we are not of the many who are swayed by the popular ideas that lie around loose, but of the limited number of those who can bear such heroic regimen; can say of our mere esoteric revelation, with Abt Vogler:

"But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;  
The rest may reason and welcome: 'tis we musicians  
know."

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Abt Vogler, xi*

That this is as it should be need not set us up; it is merely recognizing, with humble joy in our election, that the more emancipated spiritual impulse can prosper duly only in trusty repositories, where its energies are in proportioned equilibrium.

Nor are we the elect absolved from the claims of our kind. From the height of our relatively freer vision we must needs look abroad on the great social welter of those whose uneasy tendencies, identical at bottom with ours, must yet be held in with bit and bridle. And here again we see how truly, on the whole, the age has got its needed leading. "England's voice," we dare



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

to say, was a divinely ordained one. Tennyson, appeasing the meditative reader by poetic fragrance, rhythm, imagery, music, or, not less potently, entering his ready memory by a wealth of finished inevitable phrase, makes him move obediently through a finely ordered poetic world as it were in the natural way of living; so that almost without conscious reaction his mind is impregnated, like the Lotos Eaters, with an atmosphere of rich and normal life, wherein the conventions of law, social refinement, religion, wise enterprise, are all in place, a matter of course. Ordained leaders and devisers are there, Arthurs and Merlins, at the centre of things; a kind of Round Table realm like the idealized springtide season of Gareth and Lynette:

*Gareth and  
Lynette, 308*

"And all about a healthful people stept  
As in the presence of a gracious king."

A tranquil afternoon radiance this, with language almost overlaid with dreamy beauty to support it; tame and subdued indeed by the side of Browning's trenchant dialectics. But how otherwise, we ask, could the heart of a generation that hates to think be drawn in such wise as to accept the steady pressure of civic and social order?—and the answer is not easy. The many must be taught as though you taught them not; must be gently imbued with a spirit that becomes a pervasive sentiment, an encompassing tone and atmosphere of public opinion. It is not by being set to meaty difficult cerebration, or by the stimulus of daring reaction, that the great middle class is held to the steady norms of corporate life.

There is no need to quarrel, then, with the dispensation of things as they are. No call to make our poets and prophets over, or distribute their audiences differently. Each wields the style that is the man, and each finds in his readers the personal and idealistic chord that vibrates to his. We value more highly, perhaps, what we get at greater cost of work; it introduces us to a more vigorous and venturesome stratum of life. But this may be partly because it is in us to venture and men like Browning have challenged us; and just as truly it may be because we have surmounted the paralyzing wave of timid doubt and are ready to accept the challenge. Browning had to create his select audience, singing meanwhile for the future. Tennyson found his large one more nearly to his hand, and the future that he foresaw must tarry to adjust the untowardnesses of the present. It would be a mistake to conclude, however, that Tennyson's cherished life values belong therefore to a day that is past. They may suffer temporary dimness and slight, or be unheeded like the music of the spheres, but they are as permanent as Browning's, as permanent as human nature. For there is a stratum of life, vital in all of us, in which if we would go on consistently to things as they ought to be we must bow to things as they are; a stratum underlying the level of high mettle and aggressiveness; in which even while we muse and dream we may still be steady and loyal, and in which the felt law of being is not a hard-earned prize but an age's form and pressure. It was

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages* the integrity of this stratum that Tennyson had  
at heart; in this that he essayed to do his era a  
service. It required consummate art, and all the  
enticing amenities of poetic grace, to do it in  
fitting wisdom of power and make it prevail.

**Complementary Arcs in the Life Orbit:  
Tennyson and Browning**

**I**N thus endeavoring to define the dynamic distinction between Tennyson and Browning I have very nearly reached the heart of my specific theme. One more comparison of the two poets, however, or rather a projection of this one, falls to be considered here, as a further step of approach.

Browning, as our remarks about him have not obscurely implied, is the poet of the individual initiative. To him the human soul is a soul active, full of vital energy, made or marred, but also alone salvable, by its own free impulse. To Tennyson's more apprehensive feeling, on the other hand, the soul is also a thing acted upon, not indeed in such wise as to be helplessly swayed and passive, but as subject to the onset of powers good and evil, with which at every step it must reckon, and on which its ordained business is to react. While therefore Browning, splendidly self-centred, presents to the universe a dauntless front before which life is a triumph of individuality and evils are only an occasion, Tennyson moves cautiously, sensitively, in the felt presence of those

"High instincts before which our mortal Nature  
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised,"

Wordsworth  
Intimations of  
Immortality

and cannot shake himself free from them until

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

they are resolved. With him, as with Wordsworth, "a wise passivity" no less than a venturesome aggressiveness must have its perfect work. There are things in life to fear as well as things to defy.

The way of the two poets to their unspoken ideal corresponds accurately to these opposite feelings in presence of their universe. Browning's way, the way of the energizing individual, is not so much an overcoming as a taking undisputed possession of one's unique personality; and along with this goes a pervading sense of how momentous are the peculiar traits of every humblest or oddest human creature. With the individual inheres the potent fact of differentiation. For the working out of his life-problem, accordingly, Browning's constant method is to

*Epilogue to  
Dramatis Personæ  
sonnet*

"Take the least man of all mankind, as I;  
Look at his head and heart, find how and why  
He differs from his fellows utterly";

and this method leads him with unflagging zest into the most out-of-the-way corners of history and personality, to find as it were rare specimens and strange combinations. Yet with all this accentuation of differences his aim is unitary, after all; for his ever-present endeavor is to follow each case upward until in some unique manifestation it has illustrated.

*Epilogue to  
Dramatis Personæ  
sonnet*

"How heaven's high with earth's low should intertwine."  
Nothing is more inveterately characteristic of Browning than this constant quest; and so



sure is he of its success, as a working formula, that absolutely all is grist that comes to his mill. In pursuance of it he figures this "heaven's high" always as a vital power coming down from the unseen places to meet each man at the individual point where he is most himself, and thus by combination making a unique product. This is well illustrated by the way the emulous heaven yearns down to supplement Abt Vogler's musical improvisation by the super-earthly touch of genius. Hence Browning is the poet not only of the masterful individual but of the supreme moment in every man's life when for once and all the soul joins forces with the over-soul, the life of its life. There is a determining moment in every life, wherein the whole personality is concentrated, a moment

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"When eternity affirms the conception of an hour";

*Abt Vogler, 2*

and therefore the ideal attitude of man, as time and aspiration wear the thickness thin, is, like the aged St. John, to

"Lie bare to the universal prick of light,"

*A Dearth in the  
Desert, 205*

every pore open, as it were, to the supplementing divine. Thus Browning completes his individual from the divine side, which is as intensely active as the human, and forms combinations as various as are individual bents and wills.

Tennyson, too, has supremely at heart this same union of human and divine. But his approach to this ideal is more by a kind of dead-lift from the human side; not a taking sovereign possession, as of creative right, but an ar-

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

duous and progressive overcoming, by steps and stages, and with many a slip and peril, until at last the soul stands, or rather falls well-nigh forspent, on the high threshold of the House of Life. Hence the greater doubt and uncertainty that attends the whole process; the uncertainty inherent in the passive openness of the soul to untoward influences. The self-same goal of life is there; but the man must fight for it, and ceaselessly guard his flanks, and guard every inch of gain. This is how Tennyson views the soul's plight, thus acted upon:

"Ere she gain her Heavenly-best, a God must mingle with the game:

Nay, there may be those about us whom we neither see nor name,

*Locksley Hall  
Sixty Years  
After*

"Felt within us as ourselves, the Powers of Good, the Powers of Ill,  
Strowing balm, or shedding poison in the fountains of the Will."

Another point of differentiation from Browning it is essential to note: the fact that all this is not so much an individual achievement, wherein each man's uniqueness is the salient trait, as the growth and uprise of the human type, wherein each man acts only as he is working at one with all humanity. Tennyson is keenly aware of the subtle tendrils and tentacles that connect man with man; the powers good and ill that act upon him belong to the vital working-order of a unitary manhood, a society. Tennyson's realization of this constantly conditions his poetic thought; we see it worked out, for instance, in his early poem

The Palace of Art. In the most poignant hours of his personal sorrow, too, his most individual depths of experience, he still takes the age and the race into his partnership, bent on gaining some access of strength which shall be as available for all as for one:

"The high Muse answer'd: 'Wherefore grieve  
Thy brethren with a fruitless tear?  
Abide a little longer here,  
And thou shalt take a nobler leave.'"

In all this contrast of moods and methods, as we see, the difference of Tennyson from Browning is not the difference of relative incisiveness or bold insight, but quite accurately the difference due to their occupying supplemental arcs of the same orbit. It well-nigh excites our wonder at the provision made for the age's symmetrical upbuilding to note how truly the two brother-poets answer to and complete each other, supplying each the other's lack. Tennyson is more deeply involved in the large evolutionary consciousness which was rising in the heart of his scientific day. Rather than rise to the individual height alone he will take his species with him; he is, as a poet-philosopher, traversing the dim and perilous way by which manhood is being made. He cannot therefore surrender himself to an intrepid optimism; it is neither in his temperament nor his theme to do so. It is comparatively easy to be optimistic when you follow the potencies of an individual ideal, in unique genius or skill or wisdom or saintliness; but when you must encounter the clashing elements of society, the discordant

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*In Memoriam  
lyric. 2*





*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

aims and motives, the insidious allurements, the malarious air, the vagaries of blood and custom, your course is dimmed as it were by the smoke of battle and the fogs of baser instinct; and with the Preacher of old you have to acknowledge doubtfully that "God made man upright, but they have sought out many inventions."

We cannot spare either of our poets, then, after all, if we would have the whole manhood field, social as well as individual, before us; if instead of the broken arcs of the large orbit of life we would have the perfect round.

One great focus of study there is, in which the two poets come royally into harmony. From the restless meditations of each there detached itself early in his career one supreme dominating Figure, the figure of the full-orbed, full-furnished man. Neither could well come to rest, with the wealth of elements that he had at heart, until he had thus enclosed them in concrete form. And each builds his concept in a way strikingly determined by his early and inherited relations.

Browning, as becomes a kind of amateur theologian not of the establishment or university, identifies his ideal man squarely and unequivocally with the historic Christ; this is as it were his synthesis, his discovery, from his independent data. Toward the revealed Christ he sees all roads of pure aspiration leading. To him he sets the minstrel David looking forward through the ages, and from the self-sacrificing

summit of his own brother-love prophesying Christ as divinely crowning the love of which man is capable:

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"'Tis the weakness in strength, that I cry for! my flesh,  
that I seek

In the Godhead! I seek and I find it. O Saul, it shall be  
A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man like to me,  
Thou shalt love and be loved by, forever: a Hand like this  
hand

Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee! See the  
Christ stand!"

*Saul, 308*

He sets the heathen poet Cleon in despair longing for some embodiment of the all-round Greek type of human perfection; and not obscurely hints in the end that, if he only were aware, the fulfilment of his longing is at the very moment being preached in his isle by a Jew named Paulus, whose doctrine, he thinks, "could be held by no sane man." He sets the dying St. John looking back to Jesus across two thirds of a century and applying to his person the intuitive insight of the Johannine writings:

"I saw the power; I see the Love, once weak,  
Resume the Power: and in this word 'I see,'  
Lo, there is recognized the Spirit of both  
That moving o'er the spirit of man, unblinds  
His eye and bids him look."

*A Death in the  
Desert, 221*

He sets the sceptical Arab physician Karshish, with the scientific sense supposably contemporary with Christ, explaining away the fact of Lazarus' alleged resurrection from the tomb, but in spite of himself deducing the luminous solution of the world's mystery if only the thing were so:

## The Idylls and the Ages

Epistle of  
Rabbi Ish, 304

"The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?  
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too —  
So through the thunder comes a human voice  
Saying, 'O heart I made, a heart beats here!  
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself!  
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of mine,  
But love I gave thee, with myself to love,  
And thou must love me who have died for thee!"

Nor does he hesitate to identify this Christ figure with God. The fervor with which he puts this confession into the mouth of St. John is not merely dramatic; there is enough of the same strain in his other poetry to warrant us in calling it his own personal conviction:

8 Death in the  
Desert, 474

"I say, the acknowledgement of God in Christ  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it,  
And has so far advanced thee to be wise."

Nay, when, in the Epilogue to Dramatis Personæ, he speaks in his own person, after having sounded the minds of David and Renan, to give supreme answer to the question "how heaven's high with earth's low should intertwine," his conclusion, drawn from data of pure individualism, is:

Epilogue to  
Dramatis Per-  
sonæ

"That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Become my universe that feels and knows."

In this, independent as was his approach to it, we cannot attribute to him any essential break with the accepted Christology of the evangelical creed. He has thought out the problem for himself, and arrived at the orthodox conclusion.

For the rest, however, he does not reproduce or coördinate details of the historic Person-



age's life, nor in all the range of his portrayals does he essay to create a personage of his own which in any comprehensive degree embodies the large fulness of Christlike manhood. That is not his way. Rather, he portrays individual fragments of the idea, as it were, not the drama with its mighty Protagonist but the "Dramatis Personæ," with their varied bents and powers: a David, a Pope Innocent, a Caponsacchi, a Pompilia; nor shunning the while to find redeeming traits in many a figure of less heroic mould, a Paracelsus, a Fra Lippo Lippi, a Luria, a Hohenstiel-Schwangau. Their work in the social fabric he leaves us to infer, if we will, from their spirit and fitness; but we see them merely *in situ*. The social problem was not his to solve, but the endlessly varied problem of the individual. It is the individual soul that counts with him, not the soul corporate;—as he makes Tiburzio say in Luria:

"A people is but the attempt of many  
To rise to the completer life of one;  
And those who live as models for the mass  
Are singly of more value than they all."

*Luria, Act v. 299*

Always the poet of the individual initiative and the supreme moment,—this is what we are aware of in Browning.

Just here it is that Tennyson's difference becomes most pronounced and potent. To him too the ideal manhood was the product of a kind of voyage of discovery; but as befits a clergyman's son, bred in the establishment, the accepted Christology was taken for granted, as a point of departure, from which he would set

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

out to annex new realms or applications. And in thus cutting loose from the theological tradition he was as truly an amateur philosopher as Browning was an amateur theologian; from both careers, indeed, we get the sense of a thinker invading a sphere of exploration to which he was not born. Nay, we may say their distinction as leaders comes from this fact; they give new vitality to thoughts that through perfunctory treatment were becoming sterilized. We have just seen how Browning rescued the concept of the ideal man from sterility, by emphasizing its individualized parts, endowments, achievements, and bringing down the divine to supplement them. But another way of rescue also was needed, an opposite approach; for the concept may just as truly become sterile by being imprisoned in the jargon of theology or confined to a history long ago enacted in Palestine. It was to this second way that Tennyson's thoughts and temperament gravitated. To his inner vision, as to Browning's, there rose early in his career a Christ figure transmuted as it were into modern lineaments; a concept that he carried with him full half a century before its final contour was complete and its finishing touch added. In one aspect and another this concept gathered into itself the essential juices of a life's meditation, as did the Faust figure the sixty years' meditation of Goethe. But in orbiting thus into a great type figure this idealized Personage of Tennyson's must needs be related to an organic realm and a social world; must have united with it

a chapter of communal development, an era of active principle and sentiment toned by a knightly order. This Personage, which, going back to the early traditions of the British nation, he shaped and refined from prehistoric materials, he endowed with kingliness and modern chivalry and named King Arthur; his unspoken ideal being to embody in a single figure at once the Englishman's epic hero and the Englishman's Messiah.

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and the  
Ages*

Of the historic Christ, unlike Browning, he always took the essential and typical view rather than the factual and personal; recognizing in him, as did Mary of Bethany, the Life Indeed, and directing his prayer not to a form of man or God but to a supreme attribute in which man and God could share alike:

"Strong Son of God, immortal Love,  
Whom we, that have not seen thy face,  
By faith, and faith alone, embrace,  
Believing where we cannot prove."

*In Memoriam  
beginning*

This, however, belongs, as we may say, to the hidden metaphysic of his ideal. For the flesh-and-blood realization of it he sought rather a typical incarnation whom he could identify with modern motives and aims, and who should appear in position as the conscience of a social order. Hence his choice of the "flos regum Arturus" of old Joseph of Exeter; on whom his musings began a full decade before he called on the wild New Year bells to

"Ring in the Christ that is to be."

*In Memoriam  
cyl. 8*

Thus, as we see, he takes the divine element of life the other way round from Browning. He



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

sets manhood rising by evolutionary steps toward it by emulating in its institutions "the perfect man, the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," instead of making it yearn down from heaven to meet a supreme human achievement, or gleam out from unsuspected places in individual humanity.

From the beginning of his meditation on the Arthur story he felt, as is quoted in his Memoir, that there was no greater subject in the world. From the beginning, too, it would seem, though his sense of its magnitude sometimes almost eclipsed it, its grand epic possibility was in his mind, germinating and growing. This feeling of his huge theme, in fact, generated almost too great a degree of modesty; the thrust of the completed epic suffers somewhat from it. For a while he plays with the idea, so to say, as in irresponsible dreams. In the epilogue affixed to his *Morte D' Arthur*, his first serious Arthurian venture, his light touch, albeit light, conveys a very earnest and essential note of his conception:

"And so to bed; where yet in sleep I seem'd  
To sail with Arthur under looming shores,  
Point after point; till on to dawn, when dreams  
Begin to feel the truth and stir of day,  
To me, methought, who waited with a crowd,  
There came a bark that, blowing forward, bore  
King Arthur, like a modern gentleman  
Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,  
'Arthur is come again: he cannot die.'  
Then those that stood upon the hills behind  
Repeated — 'Come again, and thrice as fair;'  
And, further inland, voices echo'd — 'Come  
With all good things, and war shall be no more.'"

*Morte D' Ar-  
thur, Epilogue*

From this modest foregleam of his purpose, our minds travel forward nearly half a century; during which time we see him in that little attic room at Farringford penning the first four Idylls, or pacing the Maiden's Croft back and forth as he composes *The Holy Grail*; and when in 1891 he writes the last revising line of his completed epic, inserting it lest, as he says, "perhaps he had not made the real humanity of the King sufficiently clear in his epilogue," his finished conception is

"Ideal manhood closed in real man."

Thus, in his own words, we have the beginning and the end of Tennyson's most comprehensive life study: the Christlike manhood, divested of dogmatic and ecclesiastical presuppositions, and working its work in a period of history which can be symbolically identified with the English nineteenth century. How different this from Browning's attitude and ideal, yet with what fine supplementation answering thereto, like the completing arc in the same vast orbit, we cannot fail to see.

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Tennyson Memoir*, vol. ii  
p. 129

*Idylls*  
*Epilogue*, 38



## Idylls and Finished Epic Cycle

THE separate Idylls of the King did not come before the world in a way at all favorable to revealing either their epic fibre or their epic unity. They did not lay claim to either quality; could not well do so until the whole series was finished. Published at uncertain intervals and in hap-hazard order, from 1858, or more truly from 1842, to 1885, they modestly purported to be nothing more than modernized tales of chivalry and romance, elegantly wrought detached pictures, *εἰδυλλια*, all belonging to one epoch, but having only the name "the King" in the title as ostensible binding-thread. It was in genial accord with this apparent character that they were accepted and read; mostly, it would seem, by youthful-minded people in whom fancies still ran high and the sense of poetic beauty was a vital passion. Tennyson's exquisite earlier work had in fact been selecting and educating his audience; and for the most part the Idylls were welcomed with an acclaim which our present day seldom accords to poetry. Fitzgerald, however, who in 1835 had listened to the *Morte D'Arthur* with hearty praise, began to growl, deeming that Tennyson was swerving from the work that he was cut out to do. If we take this intimate friend of the poet as a kind of thermometer of apprecia-

1842  
1858  
1872  
1885

tion, the question rises, was Tennyson's temperature advancing beyond Fitzgerald's stationary mark, or was Tennyson, in real virile fibre, falling below himself? It must be confessed, the question was an open one. The main critical verdict passed upon the poems was that they were things of finished wizard beauty, richly laden, enchanting, almost cloying; while of under-knitting strength, or of any appreciable epic trend, there was little if any presage. They were read for themselves, not for their relation and coördination. Following the first lotos influence a reaction soon set in. The central personage, Arthur, came in for the main attack: he was decried as an impeccable prig, who talked like a curate. The central culprit, Guinevere, whose sensuous appetency for Lancelot's warmth and color was undisguisedly sympathized with, was championed by the Morris and Swinburne school as a hapless victim of royalty and diplomatic marriage, into whose embittered mind, naturally enough,

"old thoughts would crowd  
"Belonging to the time ere [she] was bought  
By Arthur's great name and his little love."

Such, in chilling measure, was the handicapping fate that began to overtake the Idylls before they were finished enough to be called in from their detached and unordered currency among more or less casual readers. Their epic strain, if indeed they contained such, was as it were in solution, apprehensible only by a refined spirit-sense. When, however, in 1869 four more poems, added to the original four,

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Morris  
The Defence  
of Guinevere*

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

supplied the beginning, the culmination, and the end of a course of Idylls, a new critical judgment set in: the wide-spread and rather idle notion that the poems were allegorical; a notion that Tennyson vigorously protested should not be pressed too far. They were in fact allegorical merely in the sense that every great chapter of life, read in its real meanings, is a virtual allegory, a parable, with all its deeds and events rich in second intention. No truth is more certain than this, that so far as we live inwardly we live in figure; and the Idylls began to seem figurative simply and solely because they began to reveal their inwardness. What call to retell these old Arthurian tales at all, indeed, if there did not pulsate in them something beyond the legend and the letter? This deeper something, however, was not in an arbitrary poetic shaping, fact or tradition turned into moralizing figure. It was in the substance. Accordingly, the allegory theory, once broached, was bound to suffer on both sides: the thing would neither go on all fours, like Bunyan's or Spenser's, nor would it cease to steal in between the lines as a haunting and elusive suggestion. With all their transparent clarity of tissue, in truth, the Idylls contained a subtle element of enigma, which would not down. Nor was it until 1885, when the last-written of them, *Balin and Balan*, was published, and the whole series was put into consecutive order and divided into the conventional twelve books, that the general public became aware of a larger and weightier inten-



tion on the part of the poet; the intention, namely, that the series should be read not as many poems merely but as one poem, with one interrelation of parts, one thread of story, one dominating epic idea. He used indeed, while they were growing, playfully to call them "his epic." The time now revealed that his playful words had been dead earnest. From this unitary point of view it is, then, not from the earlier one to which the exigences of composition and publication compelled us, that we ought to compute their intrinsic and permanent values.

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and the  
Ages*

In their completed epic form the Idylls of the King have now been before the world one-and-twenty years. The most ambitious and deeply cherished work of the poet's life, the work into which he infused the ripened meditation of half a century, has thus attained its majority. Is not the time fitting, then, to inquire what this majority date brings or holds still intact: whether now we may accord to the work the rights of wise and liberal manhood and let it speak to us on deep themes as a sage; or whether we must coldly relegate it to the nonage of outgrown fancies and dreams, or stow it away in our libraries as a splendid monument of time-serving literature. Contemplated as one tissue, one trend of vital purpose, what is its central thrust, what are its values? The question has not received its adequate answer yet.

### A Poetically Realized Philosophy

EVERY man, as Tennyson used to say, imputes himself. It is so in this magnum opus of his. The very core of Tennyson's self, of the ideal which was his life, is imputed here. And it is the core of a personality which, as all who knew agree in saying, loomed much greater than the work he did. A curious discrepancy, in fact, and one hard to resolve, has been noted. The poetic work that we have from him is pure and polished beauty; the man was rugged massive strength. His very face and mien, like that of an old-time British king, his conversation, so wise and weighty, seemed almost to belie that delicate artistry of his; it was as if a Michael Angelesque sculptor had taken to carving cameos and intaglios. Yet even to popular apprehension the personality seemed dimly to show through the poetic glamour; it was not entirely undiscovered; in the Globe edition of Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, as a slight indication, the vignette of the title-page, representing King Arthur in robe and crown, is a portrait of Alfred Tennyson. How then, we are impelled to ask, did such a personality manage—or happen—so to diffuse and disguise itself in a haze of poetic fancy and delicacy that we must needs have recourse to a penetrative spirit-sense to disentangle it?

What pulsation of a personal heart of oak is connoted, for instance, by that feminine diathesis to which his thought so inveterately gravitates,—the Enids and Lynettes and Ettarres and Viviens and Isolts and Elaines and Guineveres who are always at the storm-centre of his plot? These are Idylls of the King; and yet the first four of them were all named by women's names.

Our answer to this inquiry, and therewith as I think the clue to his appraisal of supreme values, lies largely in a just understanding of his intrinsic mind and art.

The idiom to which Browning's art had instinctive recourse, as a glance makes us aware, was the psychological. "The development of a soul—little else is worth study,"—is how, in his preface to *Sordello*, he defines his main interest. Accordingly, from the beginning of his career he plunged with youthful ardor and youthful rashness into the thickets of psychological activities;—as in *Pauline* he said of his soul:

"It has strange impulse, tendency, desire,  
Which nowise I account for nor explain. . .  
How can my life indulge them? yet they live,  
Referring to some state of life unknown."

*Pauline, 595*

Browning was thinker first and poet afterward; so imperatively so that his poetic art well-nigh breaks or comes near being outraged under his thick-crowding throng of headlong thoughts. Not so with Tennyson. Nay, almost the diametrical opposite was so. Tennyson was poet first, poet always. From the earliest his



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and the  
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whole career, on one side, was a strenuous apprenticeship in the details of this most exquisite of the fine arts. His idiom, equally instinctive with Browning's, was the descriptive, the translation of values into terms of sight and sound. Hence, whatever of deeper and more abstract thought came to him, must come endowed with the imagery, the unerring touch, the minor graces, of masterly sense perception. He translated life as he saw it into the "simple, sensuous, impassioned" medium which, as Milton held, is essential to supreme poetic utterance. So, in his severe devotion to his art, he was loath to speak out of this picturing descriptive idiom, or to mingle with it, as Browning and Wordsworth in their varying ways do, the idiom of the dialectical or philosophical. When, in the investigative course of his *In Memoriam*, he found his sorrow embarked on a profoundly psychological sea, he was at pains to disclaim the cerebrative logical method; he must make his way otherwise:

"Her care is not to part and prove;  
She takes, when harsher moods remit,  
What slender shade of doubt may flit,  
And makes it vassal unto love:

"And hence, indeed, she sports with words,  
But better serves a wholesome law,  
And holds it sin and shame to draw  
The deepest measure from the chords:

"Nor dare she trust a larger lay,  
But rather loosens from the lip  
Short swallow-flights of song, that dip  
Their wings in tears, and skim away."

*In Memoriam*  
xlvi. 274

Nor was this all. By long habituation to this accurately descriptive art, which in its field was quite analogous to the systematic observation of a scientist, he developed a kind of sixth sense, a sense for the interrelated totality of things, as they act upon all our senses at once; fusing our unbidden thoughts into one web of consciousness wherein the whole man is awake in every part. It was, though less dreamy and passive, some such a state as Wordsworth had earlier described:

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and the  
Ages*

“that serene and blessed mood  
In which the affections gently lead us on, —  
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
And even the motion of our human blood  
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
In body, and become a living soul;  
While with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.”

*Wordsworth  
Tintern Abbey  
41*

Or, to put it in more technical terms, he developed an instinct not only for the imagery but for the architectonics of his thought-world, a structure wherein all parts should hang together and form a cosmos, its discords resolved in harmony, and all suffused with the atmosphere of finished unity. As early as his first published volume Arthur Hallam had written of him: “No poet can fairly be judged of by fragments, least of all a poet, like Mr. Tennyson, whose mind conceives nothing isolated, nothing abrupt, but every part with reference to some other part, and in subservience to the idea of the whole.”

*The Poems of  
A. H. Hallam  
etc. p. 110*

We can think how this attitude to his art



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would work when, leaving the smaller world of individual sights and fancies, he entered the larger world of elemental energies and principles,—when, in other words, he essayed a philosophy of life. The instincts of his long-studied workmanship, his descriptive and lyric art on the one hand, his exacting sense of cosmic order and interrelation on the other, must in like fulness be appeased.

The quality of minute and inevitable finish in a great poem is in its way eminently rewarding. We cannot slight the masterful artistry which creates a full-orbed poetic world, wherein all aspects of time and season are in their ordained place, wherein all the unnoted influences of nature, the undertow of general sentiment and custom, and the accurate motivation of epic event, are all moving together to one coördinate result. Such is the tissue that we note most comprehensively in the completed Idylls of the King. The work smiles with the beauty of a sunlit and harmonious landscape, yet is self-evidencing and inevitable, like a chapter of cosmic fate. At the same time, it must be owned, we get this high quality at a sacrifice. A finely wrought portrayal like this does not bite, does not bring the reader up in a vigor of reaction. It lacks the thrust and inspiration of unique achievement, or Satanic defiance, or audacious uprising of spirit to new tracts of being. So its addition to the sum-total of manhood is not so much that of heroic individuality as of a Round Table, an era of communal order, wherein all elements must move upward together, not with-

out the danger that some alloy of evil may spoil the whole and make the music mute. Its conception of vital powers is not Homeric but Virgilian:

"Spiritus intus alit, totamque infusa per artus  
Mens agitat molem et magno se corpore miscet."

*The Idylle  
and the  
Ages*

*Virgil, Æneid  
vi. 726*

Thus its very finish, if we are seeking Browning's towering impulsive values, is its weakness. If our quest is for its strength, we must needs seek this in the tempered conservative values of another order, values which, when we find them, may prove to be no whit the less real and momentous for being less obtrusive.

Tennyson's philosophy of life, coming as a kind of evolved afterthought, and having to be transmuted into terms of a concrete poetic artistry, remained always essentially descriptive, a philosophy conveyed in a sensuous and picturesque medium, aided by his remarkable power of clean phrasing. The results must be reckoned with fairly and penetratively. To one who cannot follow the transmutation all the way to poet-land it might look superficially like an amateur philosophy, like what our modern slang would call butting into the metaphysic preserves. And indeed, the fact that he developed his large interpretation of life slowly, naturalizing its abstract principles only as fast as he could make them realistic in his descriptive imagination, might easily lead one to think so. A German translator of *In Memoriam*, who read the poem only as a hap-hazard miscellany of elegiac lyrics, spoke of its underlying generalizations as "philosophische Grübeleien jugend-

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and the  
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licher Art," philosophic twiddlings of juvenile character,—a not unnatural judgment of the German mind. But surely, here the poet's personality and life-meditation rise up to give pause to such hasty judgment. We can test the peculiar character of his philosophy, its combination of image and abstraction, by such poems as *The Higher Pantheism*, written for the first meeting of the Metaphysical Society, and *De Profundis*, and *The Ancient Sage*, and *Akbar's Dream*. We must, however, to be fair, estimate his philosophy by his organic world of thought, not by detached and pictured details. Nor will it pay to jump to conclusions as to its depth. Its very transparency may deceive. A philosopher runs risks in translating abstractions into the sensuous and concrete; you may thereby see its principles so clearly as to miss its hidden bearings, its threads of vital connection.

The poet has indeed not escaped this adverse judgment. A recent writer, to whom his conservative spirit is not truly congenial, avers that Tennyson, for all his long dominance of his England, did not really strike into the central current of the age's spiritual movement, but stranded himself in an outlying eddy; while, as representative of the main current, he would name for chief distinction such men as Zola and Ibsen and George Meredith. Well, perhaps the question of main currents and eddies is, after all, relevant only to the mind which pronounces on them; perhaps indeed, as in the old empire, all roads of earnest ideal lead ultimately to

Rome. With this matter, however, I have nothing here to do. Nor am I holding a brief for Tennyson's superiority or supremacy in thought-values. My object is merely to set forth, as fairly as I may, what I think they are, in this crowning work of his. For the rest, when we have the data in hand, we may safely be left to judge for ourselves.

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and the  
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### *The Ultimate Goal of Tennyson's Study*

**W**HAT these thought-values are, — have I kept this answer waiting too long? It seems to me rather that its elements, or at least its groundings, have been rising luminously to view all the while. We have but to bring out and coördinate a little more, on the basis we have, and add the aspect with which specifically we can connote the idea of permanence. And one thing we may premise: he was not stranded in a side-eddy of movement. He was working at a depth so far beneath, or perhaps steering for a haven so far beyond, that the world has a good stretch of sailing yet to do, albeit on the sea which its long-established ideals have made familiar, before it catches up with him. It was not for nothing, nor for any subordinate thing, that he laid out half a century's creative thought and massive personality on the theme of "ideal manhood closed in real man," expanding his concept the while to the dimensions of a world-period and a social order. The real heart of this theme, when we find it, we shall recognize as a thing that needed setting forth, and as a thing done to stay.

We have spoken of the dominating personage of the Idylls; but to resolve the poet's meditation into a study of the person of Arthur, whether as ideal manhood closed in real man

or as a modern gentleman of stateliest port, is only to break ground on his real subject; only to construct as it were the personal scaffolding inside of which, like a fair city built to music, a great truth of life, nay the greatest, is taking form and articulation and beauty. We must penetrate to the underworld of motive and principle whence proceeds the greatness, the rounded manhood truth, without which no communal order can permanently survive.

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and the  
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When we ask what this supreme principle is, we are conducted straight to the one vital subject of the world;—for all subjects that have hands and feet and will and power run up ultimately into one. Schopenhauer may dream of the world as will and idea, Nietzsche of the world as sheer overbearing will alone, but they leave unanswered the question: Will to do and be what? and their speculations run inevitably into a chaos of pessimism. Philosophers and prophets have brooded dimly upon the problem, feeling the thrill of the one solution long before they could clarify it with words, searching what or what manner of time the spirit that was in them did signify. Poets and romancers, who stand on the shoulders of the philosophers and see more intuitively, are drawn by a kind of cosmic vibration to it, as the needle is drawn to the pole. You cannot sing a living song, cannot write a popular novel, cannot make an acceptable drama, whether in earnest or sport, without paying homage to it. It holds forth the one promise of restful outlook for life. What



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and the  
Ages*

*In Memoriam*  
lvi. 2

better proof do we need of the reality of a thing unseen than is afforded by the multitudinous musings of men who even in darkest hours and dimmest prospects still

"trusted God was love indeed  
And love Creation's final law"?

What better, unless it be the lighter thoughts and feelings with which the world is laden, and with which men play? Love is, properly speaking, the one universal subject about which the world cares. What is the central endeavor of romance, to say nothing of poetry and eloquence, but a tireless exploitation, in its countless aspects, of the psychology of love? That is its recognized province. Like the fairy-tales, it is desperately set on conducting its army of mutually infected couples, out of every conceivable difficulty and untowardness, to the point where in the conjugal fruition of love they can "live happily ever after."

But romance has contented itself, for the most part, with one section of the vast field. Standing in wonder and delight before that mysterious magnetism of spiritual force which seizing on two unlike hearts makes them one, "consonant chords that shiver to one note," and in the twinkling of an eye transforms for them the whole universe, romance is so dazzled with the sight that it looks no farther. It is enough for it to have penetrated to the beating heart of the matter, and to have nobly appropriated the central source of life's joys and potencies. But what of love in the mind as well as in the passions? What of love in the enlightened will, deal-

ing with the needy affairs of a world, with law and social order and the rights of other united couples, as each moves in its divinely vitalized circle? What of love in man's allotted sphere of work and personal power? What of love at its attained goal of conjugal fellowship, in ordained position to reach beyond the horizon of the couple and the home and act upon the outlying world? Is love then merely an elemental league offensive and defensive, a multiplication of selfishness by two, with an obverse of hate or exclusiveness or indifference; or may it, from the centre where it has learned to forget its self-seeking, spread out waves of like radiance to all mankind? Shall we love others better for having found the love of one, or shall our hearts be imprisoned in a conjugal enclosure, with no warmth and blessing to spare for the needy mass outside? And if love transcends the conjugal enclosure, how shall it be guided and regulated, that its working to the farthest circumference of its power be good and not evil? Multitudes of questions like these throng into a mind of larger mould like that of Tennyson, as soon as he moves in the idiom of the Love absolute, and realizes in its depth and breadth that love is creation's final law. And it is just such questions as these that the poet is concerned to resolve, through the medium of these twice-told tales which he names *Idylls of the King*.

In other words, his aim is to enlarge the theme of love to epic proportions, by interweaving it with the ongoings of civilization and history. To this end he starts where the romantic sen-

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timent of the world leaves off, though not without taking full account of its values; namely, at the point where love makes transition from the tether of wedded union, and the purlieu of the household, and the ties of blood and family, to work its work in the larger world as a hallowing spiritual power. At this point his first and ostensible appeal is to those light-hearted readers who will cherish the poems as clean wholesome Idylls, and if they will it so, as nothing more. The epic is not forced upon them. Underneath this surface appeal, however, it remains for those who will dwell patiently with the inner continuity of concept, and trace its fundamental spiritual current, to find how far-reaching these poems are. And so if they will receive it, this is the epic which a half century's converse with men's vital interests has designed. The modesty of its demand is no index of its majesty of aim.



### Roots in Personal Experience

**T**O this epic undertaking of Tennyson's contributed not only his poetic bent, so harmoniously compounded of the imaginative, the scientific, and the philosophical, but also some very momentous lines of his own personal experience.

As early as 1833 he had mused on the legends of King Arthur, and had sketched the scenario of a kind of musical masque on the subject. Just here, however, taking note of the date, which was that of his annus mirabilis, we must reckon with an event which wrought so to deepen his whole being that musical masques, or any kind of literary exquisiteness, could not well be the adequate vehicle of such a theme. In 1833 his friend Arthur Henry Hallam, dying, left him to recover from one of the most notable bereavements of literary history. Here was a rare friendship invaded by death; here, in the poet's own bosom, the purest pulsation of brother-love was ravaged and desolated, according to first seeming, by untimely Fate. Thus at one staggering stroke he was brought, in the field of his own constant spirit, to face love in its most spiritual and unmixed manifestation, and to know by the removal of its object what a tremendous power it was in life. We get some idea of how his mind was predis-

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Ages*

posed to receive the stroke by recalling that it was the first invasion by death of the circle of the Cambridge "Apostles," that band of young men in whom was active the finest and most forward-looking spirit of the time. "In those 'dawn-golden times' of the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century," says a recent reviewer,\* "youth was not only seething with speculation, penetrated with a fine disdain of everything selfish, petty, false, filled to the brim with poetry, but it had the courage of its enthusiasms, it was ebullient with the consciousness of its own powers. 'The world is one great thought,' cried Jack Kemble, 'and I am thinking it!'" If Tennyson's spirit was always as sensitive as an Eolian harp to every breath of his age's thought, we can think what it must have been in the centre of that brilliant circle, of which he was the acknowledged laureate and Hallam, in their debating contests, "the master-bowman." We can think, too, how the latter's untimely death would naturally work to precipitate into substance and form thoughts that had long been in vague solution in the poet's mind.

The result was such as to reveal the momentous nature of the experience. Nine years of silence, for one thing, during which time he wrought patiently and fundamentally at his poetic art; for another, an immense deepening and enlarging of his whole attitude to life and the universe. At one sharp stroke, without at

\* In the New York Times Saturday Review for January 19, 1907, article on Mrs. Brookfield's book "The Cambridge Apostles."

all abjuring the beauty of his youthful dreams, he found himself transplanted from poetic non-age to poetic and philosophic majority. In a very striking figure, taken from the phenomena of cold, he conceives first of the sudden congelation of his powers induced by sorrow:

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"Break, thou deep vase of chilling tears,  
That grief hath shaken into frost!"

*In Memoriam  
iv, 3*

and then the liberation to maturer things:

"But Death returns an answer sweet:  
'My sudden frost was sudden gain,  
And gave all ripeness to the grain,  
It might have drawn from after-heat.'"

*In Memoriam  
ixxi, 3*

How much this meant for him in the large he records in the epilogue to *In Memoriam*; written just at the close of his nine silent years:

"Regret is dead, but love is more  
Than in the summers that are flown,  
For I myself with these have grown  
To something greater than before;

"Which makes appear the songs I made  
As echoes out of weaker times,  
As half but idle brawling rhymes,  
The sport of random sun and shade."

*In Memoriam  
Epilogue, 5, 6*

In the event that gave rise to the composition of *In Memoriam*, then, we are to recognize the first cardinal stroke of personal experience in preparing the poet for his great epic work; and *In Memoriam* itself may be regarded as a kind of preliminary, or understudy, to the deep-lying and vitalizing theme of the finished *Idylls*. Tennyson's whole nature speaks therein, but in a somewhat more ele-



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

mental and compendious utterance. Of the Idylls his son, as biographer, writes, "We may perhaps say that now the completed poem, regarded as a whole, gives his innermost being more fully, though not more truly, than *In Memoriam*."

What, then, was the earlier poem's contribution to the life-theme of Love, and how made?

As to its ruling tone and method, as soon as we get beneath the chastened purity of its poetic phrasing, we discern in *In Memoriam* a procedure which, beyond any other trait of Tennyson, naturalizes him in the dominant idiom of his age. It may surprise us to learn that when the poem came out, with its long-drawn almost morbid noting of all possible phases of bereaved grief, Huxley praised it for its "insight into scientific method." The judgment was true: we have here the thoroughness, the precision, the careful observation of a scientific investigation; it is only the phenomena studied and the class of data which have kept us from counting it with the natural science researches which have hitherto so nearly monopolized the field that we have agreed to name science. The poem is in truth a quasi-scientific, nay let us say a thoroughly scientific study of the actual survival of love, through the phenomena of association with grief, with a view to the bearing of this on the eventual survival and glorification of it in unseen tracts of being,—in other words, on the vital question of immortality. To this end, the poet has analyzed and interpreted love as it

makes itself felt in his own experience of bereavement, which for the purpose he has made typical and universal. Nor is its bearing alone on the immortality of the individual. The thought is evolutionary. It carries up the concept of surviving and ennobling love from the individual to the social, the species so to say, and through that to the cosmic reference, enlarging and enriching its purview, until at the end, addressing his transplanted friend, he can say,

"Strange friend, past, present, and to be;  
Loved deeper, darklier understood;  
Behold, I dream a dream of good,  
And mingle all the world with thee."

Here we have all the elements of the later epic theme, only studied in more abstract form, and moving through another arc of the vast orbit.

A glance at Browning's differing attitude (for he too was a life-long student of love) is instructive here, as still further accentuating the distinction that we have found so characteristic between the two poets. We recall that high-water mark of Browning's bold exploring, where he makes the minstrel David laugh with the rapture of discovery, yet curb himself with awe and for love's sake, at the thought that he, the intrepid adventurer in life-values, and if he, that

"a man may o'ertake  
God's own speed in the one way of love."

It is the exceptionally endowed individual discovering his highest possibility in God, nay for

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*In Memoriam  
cxix. 3*

*Saul, 261*

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

the moment seemingly almost beyond Him, yet sinking the pretension and by so doing manifesting a yet finer reach of love. That is Browning's individualizing way. Tennyson's, rather, is to diffuse his discovery through all the world of common weal and onward time, broadening it as fast as he deepens it, thus making it universally available. His evolutionary vision is not only intensive but extensive, or as he puts the matter:

"The love that rose on stronger wings,  
Unpalsied when he met with Death,  
Is comrade of the lesser faith  
That sees the course of human things."

*In Memoriam  
cxxxviii. 1*

Beyond the individual achievement or experience both contributing and contributed to, rises always the background of an interrelated world of mankind.

For this *In Memoriam* study of love Tennyson chooses the sacred passion in the form of friendship, man for man,

"such  
A friendship as had master'd Time;  
Which masters Time indeed, and is  
Eternal, separate from fears."

*In Memoriam  
lxxxv. 16, 17*

For its transcendental involvements love can perhaps better be explored in this manifestation of it:—love in its pure spiritual essence, its roots in what is likest God within the soul, its workings freed for the time from the complicating element of the sexual and the demonic. But while such research of love solves the ethereal and eternal bearings of it, it does



not fill out the problem as this actually exists. The David and Jonathan affection, the love that is "wonderful, passing the love of women," is so rarely actualized in earth that it yields light on life mainly as an abstraction. Nor is it more sacred, or more free from alien and evil invasion than is the love that begins with sex. Arthur and Lancelot, fighting the world's battles together, felt the divine pulsation of it;

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"Whereat the two,  
For each had warded either in the fight,  
Swore on the field of death a deathless love.  
And Arthur said, 'Man's word is God in man:  
Let chance what will, I trust thee to the death.'"

*The Coming of  
Arthur, 129*

Yet it is one of the most poignant notes of the Idylls that this sacred trust was treacherously belied; and Lancelot, captive to a lower allure-ment of love, went under. The great problem of love must be worked out by more intricate computation, and with resolving of the elements that obtain in universal society. Whatever maybe true of a supersensual world where they neither marry nor are given in marriage, here on earth there is the love of sex to be reckoned with, a fundamental element of the problem.

Then too, just beyond the elemental sway of passion and the enclosure of the united pair, there is the vital problem of love and duty; for Duty too, in a divinely ordered universe, must be listened to and obeyed as the "stern Daughter of the Voice of God." To one with Tennyson's prevailing sense of a universe which, to

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*In Memoriam  
Prologue, 2*

be true, must move to "music in the bounds of law," this ethical element must not be ignored. If to Love he could say,

"Our wills are ours, we know not how ;  
Our wills are ours, to make them thine,"

none the less he must say to Duty, with Wordsworth,

"Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong ;  
And the most ancient heavens, through Thee, are fresh and strong."

*Wordsworth  
Ode to Duty, 47*

And in looking over the world of affairs he cannot be unaware, as a fact to be resolved, that

"There are who ask not if thine eye  
Be on them ; who, in love and truth,  
Where no misgiving is, rely  
Upon the genial sense of youth."

*Wordsworth  
Ode to Duty, 9*

Such as these, the great light-hearted body of "those who eddy round and round" must find their place in a love-governed world ; it is not a question, for them, of love or duty but of love and duty.

In this part of his theme, as in the other, I am persuaded, we come in contact again with a deeply ploughing personal experience of Tennyson's. I cannot help concluding that his earlier poem of that title had its clarifying share in the history of his life-study of love. In its way this experience was perhaps as crucial as the one to which we refer the creation of *In Memoriam*. Tennyson's marriage, when at length it took place, was an ideally blessed one ; but are we aware that he was then nearly forty years old, and that his long engagement to Emily Sellwood had been ten years broken off?



The records of his life are very reticent about it; but the fact was that duty, the prosaic duty of getting an income to warrant marriage, urged an inexorable prior claim. The poem Love and Duty does not read like a merely dramatic putting of a case.

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"For Love himself took part against himself  
To warn us off, and Duty loved of Love —  
O this world's curse, — beloved but hated — came  
Like Death betwixt thy dear embrace and mine,  
And crying, 'Who is this? behold thy bride,'  
She push'd me from thee."

*Love and Duty*

The poem, a small-minded critic says, rings false; it goes on to talk priggishly to the woman in the case, like a curate. But just this same thing, and on precisely similar grounds, the pagan school says of Arthur's farewell speech to Guinevere in the Idylls; which latter indeed, according to the size of the occasion recognized in it, is either the highest or the most vulnerable passage in the whole epic. It is the touchstone of his great theme; set, as it were, "for the fall and rising again of many," according to their harmony with the spirit of the poem. And in fact Tennyson's experience yielded him a strange repetition of deep insight. He was brought to confront the imminent stroke of a virtual new bereavement; nay, for ten years he was doomed to go on alone, the divided half of a conjugal relation, as he had long felt himself the divided half of a hallowed friendship. Was he not in position to test the problem of love at first hand? And just as in the case of Arthur Hallam's death, he coined his

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

abysmal experience into a new contribution to the question: Shall love therefore be mourned and buried as an unvital thing, or shall it survive, and gather strength, and rise as a permanent ennoblement of life to higher things? Shall not so divine a pulsation, even though benumbed by frost and hard fate, pluck good from its ruins? The question is no idle or theoretical one with him:

"Of love that never found his earthly close,  
What sequel? Streaming eyes and breaking hearts?  
Or all the same as if he had not been?

Not so. Shall Error in the round of time  
Still father Truth? O shall the braggart shout  
For some blind glimpse of freedom work itself  
Thro' madness, hated by the wise, to law  
System and empire? Sin itself be found  
The cloudy porch oft opening on the Sun?  
And only he, this wonder, dead, become  
Mere highway dust? or year by year alone  
Sit brooding in the ruins of a life,  
Nightmare of youth, the spectre of himself?"

*Love and Duty*

It cannot be that love alone, among the passions that die only to pass into something rich and strange,—that love alone, highest of all, is incapable of resurrection. But how shall it rise? Its object cruelly thrust away by fate, its "faith thro' form" ruthlessly denied him, the shock must needs be diffused through all his life; in other words, it must be transferred from the sphere of a sweet and crowned passion to the sphere of will and work and healing hallowing time.

' Wait, and Love himself will bring  
The drooping flower of knowledge changed to fruit  
Of wisdom. Wait: my faith is large in Time,  
And that which shapes it to some perfect end."

*Love and Duty*

A hard sacrificial road, a veritable crucifixion,  
opens before him; to be met only by answering  
obedience and tensely of resolution:

“Live — yet live —  
Shall sharpest pathos blight us, knowing all  
Life needs for life is possible to will —  
Live happy.”

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Love and Duty*

That he has in mind, however, not merely an  
exotic experience but a larger truth for all his  
kind, is evident from the following lines, which,  
warning against subsiding on a lower passion  
and accepting the loathly alternative of sense,  
touches on the very rock on which the society  
of the Round Table so sadly split:

“Will some one say, Then why not ill for good?  
Why took ye not your pastime? To that man  
My work shall answer, since I knew the right  
And did it; for a man is not as God,  
But then most Godlike being most a man.”

*Love and Duty*

To bend his quivering wounded heart to duty,  
and to tell his lady so,—have we not here, in  
essence, the critic's note of the “impeccable  
prig”? It is the point of all his writings, per-  
haps, where the note of his philosophy comes  
nearest to being flattened to the note of the  
homiletic. But we cannot deny a fibre of strength  
in it. And so it is. You come always upon  
strength, the strength of deep-laid founda-  
tions, when you get below the delicate modu-  
lations of Tennyson's music. We shall get the  
echoes of the same austere bass note, in the  
Holy Grail and Guinevere, and indeed in all the  
poems that concern themselves with the high  
meanings and ends of the epic action.



### Evolutionary Stages in the Epic Theme

I HAVE dwelt on these poems that connect themselves with Tennyson's personal experiences because they stake out in a way the whole inner situation of the Idylls. In the Idylls too the vision of love in its sacredness and glory is the inspiring object; but with a change and enlargement of venue. Not now love rising from death and sorrow, as in *In Memoriam*; not love rising from stern repression to richer ends, as in *Love and Duty*; but love already in possession of all the elements of fruition, and working its work in the world. It is the very roomiest conceivable field that he thus lays out for it; a field that taxes to the utmost his descriptive metaphysic, taking in as it does the elements of body and spirit; love shed abroad not only in the passions of the flesh, but in the work and the wisdom and the will of holiest manhood. Because, then, it is conceived not alone in the domestic relations but in all the powers and activities that make a man large and kingly, the theme can be worked out only on the kingly scale, the scale of Arthur conceived as ideal manhood closed in real man. Nor can so comprehensive a theme well be laid down as a proposition and urged upon the brain, in the terms of Browning's dialectics; it must come to men as a luminous at-



mosphere, an environment of beauty, a music, and then most potent perhaps when least directly realized by the reader. When therefore we consider the scope of his field of thought, we cannot say that Tennyson erred in his choice of a conveying medium.

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

Arthur is the centre and soul of the action, in every component tale of the series. What Arthur embodies is the real propaganda that Tennyson has at heart. The love that suffuses such a kingly nature as Arthur's is the supreme ideal for humanity as it exists in organized civilization and society. But it is not Arthur who is directly portrayed. Rather he is the hallowing presence of the place; and in the semi-detached stories which make up the epic we read his manhood as reflected in a chivalric order of knights and ladies, or as sinned against by heedlessness and self and earthly passion. A touch of his great manhood is smitten into every knight who takes his vows upon him:

"But when he spake, and cheer'd his Table Round  
With large, divine, and comfortable words,  
Beyond my tongue to tell thee — I beheld  
From eye to eye thro' all their Order flash  
A momentary likeness of the King";

*The Coming of  
Arthur, 266*

and this likeness, so long as they remain undivorced from his will, they never wholly lose, however imperfect a reflection they may make of it according to their personality:

"For good ye are and bad, and like to coins,  
Some true, some light, but every one of you  
Stamp'd with the image of the King."

*The Holy  
Grail, 25*

And so, each in his way, they set out to be the

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

instruments of his ideal, the ideal of ennobled Love making a realm in the earth.

But in the actualized social order this regenerate passion must begin where the social order begins. It must begin with the pair, the couple, lover and mate ; and from the conjugal love and union there nucleated must radiate outward until its vital influence fills society full. It cannot ignore the social unit, that primal segmentation by fission, as it were, from which the whole corporate tissue is engendered. The ideal love can neither leap to the highest by celibate asceticism like Galahad's and Percivale's, nor prosper in the lowest by shameless passion like Vivien's or bold contempt of conjugal faith like Tristram's or secret undermining of it, however varnished by bravery and courtesy, like Lancelot's and Guinevere's. Each of these by-ways of love, or the lower instinct on which it is prone to subside, is followed out by some group of characters, in a chain of inexorable consequence, leaving the one ideal so much the more clearly delimited and defined. No: there is one, and but one, free and open way before it: the austere yet spiritually luminous road wherein love and faith, lover and friend, self and neighbor, home and humanity, flesh and spirit, law and liberty, each alike gets its harmonious measure of due, and neither suffers from the other. And this way begins with the sacred marriage of hearts. From this centre it is, the conjugal centre, that all the high and creative potencies of life and society radiate.

Such is the initial ideal that opens before Arthur, on his way to that battle in which he earns crown and realm; an ideal the vision of which transfigures the world for him:

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"the world  
Was all so clear about him that he saw  
The smallest rock far on the faintest hill,  
And even in high day the morning star."

*The Coming of  
Arthur, 96*

For such conjugal ideal the pure friendship of Lancelot and the flush of knightly glory, much as they enrich the manly life of achievement, can in no wise compensate.

"Shall I not lift her from this land of beasts  
Up to my throne and side by side with me?  
What happiness to reign a lonely king, . . .  
Vext with waste dreams? for saving I be join'd  
To her that is the fairest under heaven,  
I seem as nothing in the mighty world,  
And cannot will my will nor work my work  
Wholly, nor make myself in mine own realm  
Victor and lord. But were I join'd with her,  
Then might we live together as one life,  
And reigning with one will in everything,  
Have power on this dark land to lighten it,  
And power on this dead world to make it live."

*The Coming of  
Arthur, 79*

Faithfulness to this ideal, and consistent speech and act in the idiom of it, are just what makes Arthur the remote perfection, the impeccable prig, of the critics; nothing else. We may take the poet's conception or leave it; but this it is. And in truth this is what Arthur would be if these poems were only idle twice-told tales, a rehash of Malory; that is, if the Idylls contained no deeper story within the story. According to the eyes and standard by which men judge him



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

he is the touchstone of hearts: either an austere Puritan binding men to impossible vows and out of touch with human nature; or what Guinevere, when it is too late to mend the broken plan, confesses him to be:

"Ah great and gentle lord,  
Who wast, as is the conscience of a saint  
Among his warring senses, to thy knights."

*Guinevere, 633*

In fact, his fate among men is just the poet's reproduction of the Messianic way among men; they do to him as they list, and in the long run he has to die as witness to the truth. It is in the light of this concept that we must read Arthur's last tender yet doomful address to the fallen queen. As I have intimated, this speech of Arthur is either the supreme point of a vast epic idea or the most vulnerable point of a series of second-hand idylls, according to the size and bent of the reader; it either sounds sanctimonious, like the homily of a curate, or in majestic character, as it were the eternal manhood ideal pronouncing doom.

To determine which it shall be, in our large interpretation of the epic action, we must not omit also to take fair note of the other thread of motive that he has interwoven with the initial love motive, the ever-vital motive of love and duty. The king who could so speak of outraged love at the failure point of his plan, was also carrying a greater than domestic burden, a spiritual passion which all along wrought with the passion of the flesh to broader nobler ends; and so at the close of *The Holy Grail*,



which in the same idiom marks the true culmination of the ideal, he could say:

"the King must guard  
That which he rules, and is but as the hind  
To whom a space of land is given to plow,  
Who may not wander from the allotted field  
Before his work be done, but, being done,  
Let visions of the night or of the day  
Come as they will; and many a time they come,  
Until this earth he walks on seems not earth,  
This light that strikes his eyeball is not light,  
This air that smites his forehead is not air  
But vision — yea, his very hand and foot —  
In moments when he feels he cannot die,  
And knows himself no vision to himself,  
Nor the high God a vision, nor that One  
Who rose again."

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*The Holy  
Grail, 301*

As we see him thus going steadily through duty to doom, how we are reminded of that idealized Being who in old scripture days cried, "I have trodden the wine-press alone, and of the people there was none with me"! So it must be, in our times as in the older, until our hearts are enlarged to see things as they are.

Here speaks the king in every man who will let his whole manhood speak, and who will not follow wandering fires, as did the Holy Grail knights who would patch up their broken vows by religious sentiment. And to this ideal their hearts return, when the false fires are burnt out and they awake to life as it is; as the noblest and most responsible culprit of them all herself confesses, when only heaven is left her for amends:

"Ah my God,  
What might I not have made of thy fair world,

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Guinevere, 649*

Had I but loved thy highest creature here?  
It was my duty to have loved the highest;  
It surely was my profit had I known;  
It would have been my pleasure had I seen.  
We needs must love the highest when we see it,  
Not Lancelot, nor another."

There, in a word, where at last we see the highest as it is and in spite of all lower preëmptions love it when we see it,—there, with arms outspread in forgiveness and blessing, stands the deathless ideal which is both our conscience and our redemption. Nothing less than Arthur, the ideal incarnate and working consistently to right wrongs and survive short-sightedness, could be the adequate expression of this. Parts of it could be given, broken lights, the smaller and glamouring parts, otherwise. Guinevere wanted the warmth and color of it, and for a time subsided on the lower, under secret protest of law and truth. But when at last, her eyes opened and the elemental fires burned to ashes, she was aware that "that pure severity of perfect light" was the blending of all the primary colors and the harmonious diffusion of all manhood warmth, her supreme nobility of nature woke and turned to it like the needle to the pole. A parable this, we say. Rather it is life become literal and real, the truth at the bottom of the well. Nor are we at issue here with Browning. At the heart of it, though reached by a different way, is the same thing that we have noted in his ideal, that audacious notion of

*A Dearth in the  
Desert, 632*

"Indulging every instinct of the soul  
There where law, life, joy, impulse are one thing."

At the frontier of the angel's land, whether we have travelled with Tennyson or Browning, this "ultimate, angels' law" comes in sight, and the soul finds its peace.

But it was not in Tennyson's cautious nature to indulge instincts; no, not for a moment. For him, as for Wordsworth, they were too rudimental to be accepted blindly or made the self-sufficient law of life. They must be subjected to the control of moral order and of the idealizing spirit. Besides, in this world wherein we live, this world of sensuous beauty and energy and glamour, we cannot ignore the existence of "Lancelot, nor another." With such men it is, men in whom the blood pulses warm and sense is strong, that the braveries and courtesies, the conventions and refinements of life, are intimately associated. An epic action of such scope as this must needs reckon with them. The social order is bound up with them; cannot survive without them. Their "high instincts" must be directed and regulated. So, true to the impulse of his realistic metaphysic, Tennyson strikes for the primal germs of action, as these are at work in the corporate heart. If conjugal love is the divinely ordained unit of social integrity, none the less the unit of conjugal love itself, its elemental throb, is sexual passion, that magnetic pulsation sense and soul in one, charged positively and negatively with such sweet and awful power. This mystic thing, this wonder, as in the lightly touched romance of the day so in the Idylls, is the spring of the whole epic study before us. What shall this



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

passion be, oh, what shall it be, in the teleologic world-order,—a union of instincts or a union of spiritual ideals, or both, hallowed and hallowing, in one? When out of twain emerges through its fateful power one heart and will, what shall the one be? This was the crux of Tennyson's problem, on which his mind fastened with a sureness of insight at once creative and scientific. On the solution hung untold issues, broad as the world, yet inevitable as the processes of natural law and evolution. It was in the same scientific spirit and method which Huxley praised in *In Memoriam* that Tennyson approached the great subject. It was at bottom a psychological and biological investigation. For its solution he must lay things out on a large scale, the scale not of the individual but of the species; and as he saw the species not crude and animal, but refined and spiritualized, to fit his research he must needs create a poetic world, and people it, and endow it with a round of seasons and weathers, burgeoning spring and full flower and withered leaf and icy winter, suffusing it all with an endlessly responsive yet limpid atmosphere. In his sense of completeness no minutest element of the process, in nature or spirit, could be overlooked.

The large course of this poetic world of his was marked out by his apprehensive sensitive nature. It could hardly have been other than in the negative direction. The *Idylls of the King*, as has been remarked, are a modern *Paradise Lost*. From the first "little rift within the lute," the



first unguarded moment of giving that primal instinct free course or one smallest advantage of upper hand, this nineteenth century epic traces the subtle accumulative results, through all the bliss and woe of it, traversing

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"The slow sweet hours that bring us all things good,  
The slow sad hours that bring us all things ill,"

*Love and Duty*

until, as by inevitable fate, the fair Round Table goes under in mist and gloom. Yet by that very means, with its inexorable concatenation of cause and effect, the truth stands out at last all the clearer, that it ought not so to have been. Arthur passes, but he cannot die; and the world of ideal can never again be as if he had not lived. By the very ruins in which the old order is left weltering the air of truth is immensely cleared. And this latter-day Christ, the ideal manhood closed in real man, like the ancient one, is obedient even unto death, and the road that opens there is the road of resurrection.

Such was Tennyson's way, marked out by temperament and by tender depth of insight. A paradise with such subtly disintegrating elements at work in it could hardly be other than a Paradise Lost. He could not solve and dismiss the matter with the aggressive nonchalance of Browning; could neither cut the knot of the problem and leap to the intuitive ideal height, nor accept the splendid instinct and ensue it—could not leave the mastery of the problem either with a Galahad, supinely ascetic and saintly, or with a Gawayne, the puppet of the moment "whom men call Light-of-Love."

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

Browning cuts the knot; and when only individual souls are in the balance, with what ease! His Ottima and Sebald, in the very apogee of sinful passion and crime, are in a moment brought to their holier selves by the casually overheard song of the silk-winder Pippa. Tennyson was not made of such lightly optimistic stuff. There were too many tangles and tendrils in the corporate life to be disengaged and straightened, too much that usage and custom had burned into the communal blood, too complex laws of interactive being calling for appeasement, to make the enigma an easy one. All this, as we see, consorts accurately not only with Tennyson's temperament but with that huge life-theme of his, broader than Browning's, which could not deem the individual soul evolved to the height until there was interwoven with its powers a social function satisfied, a fulfilled relation to its heritage of law and custom and sentiment,—in a word, the coördinate elements of a world vitalizable by the holiest potencies of love. The man and the characteristic problem make the difference.

In thus following from its beginnings the subtle course of a modern *Paradise Lost*, the poet strikes, quite naïvely, for the very storm-centre of the social problem, "the woman in the case"; it is this fact, largely, which imbues his story with an undeniable feminine and as it were passive tone. This, however, not in airy lightness, as does the general tissue of modern romance, but in almost too abysmal seriousness. The kingly and initiative half of the ideal, Arthur, is already

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

an era-filling presence before him ; what now of the queenly and responsive half, so ordained and typified in the conjugal marvel of love? Untold things depend on the answer she makes to the high purpose laid upon her, on the way she accepts and ensues the huge responsibility. As the spiritual arbitrix of society, she must be not only a woman but a queen. As the wandering bard had sung of Arthur at the beginning,

“and could he find  
A woman in her womanhood as great  
As he was in his manhood, then, he sang,  
The twain together well might change the world,”

*Guinevere, 288*

so Arthur, single-hearted in his large kingly design, entered the sacred sacrament of marriage as to a consecration,

“Believing, ‘Lo, mine helpmate, one to feel  
My purpose and rejoicing in my joy.’”

*Guinevere, 482*

But a shadow falls across the very threshold of the lofty purpose; the bard’s chant is not finished:

“even in the middle of his song  
He falter’d, and his hand fell from the harp,  
And pale he turn’d, and reel’d, and would have fallen,  
But that they stay’d him up; nor would he tell  
His vision.”

*Guinevere, 300*

It remained for Tennyson to tell it, in its sweet sad length of fated history, a history of earthly failure. The highest trust ever laid on woman was laid on Guinevere; if she failed, and dragged a realm into her failure, was it from spiritual overstrain, because it is not in woman to fill out the scope of a world ideal, or from spiritual subsidence on shortsightedness and unguarded passion? The whole problem of the masculine



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

and feminine elements of life, and their interaction and coördination, lies involved here.

We are by no means, however, to construe this failure of the Table Round as in any sense Tennyson's indictment of womankind; as if, like Adam, he too would say, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." In every sensitive pulsation of his nature, side by side with what so fatefully is, he makes clear what might have been; there are Enids as well as Vivians, Elaines as well as Guineveres. Nay, the course of growing evil in the Table Round is just the opposite of spiritual overstrain; spiritual drifting and apathy rather, leaving the holier womanhood flaccid with too little exercise. If love maimed or perverted may go as low as hell, no less truly, in free and holy course, even without transcending its initial domestic tether, it may rise and lift the human soul to purest heaven. The highest impulse in life, yet also corruptio optimi pessima. Just because it is so high, the law of its sweet passion working in inverse order may plunge it to the very nadir of baseness. It was at the vivid realization of this portentous fact that Tennyson trembled. Like Goethe, he saw woven into the human tissue the eternal truth that the woman-power, so yielding and self-immolating, is yet the upward pull of the world, —

*Goethe, Faust  
end*

"Das Ewig-Weibliche  
Zieht uns hinan."

But just because this is so, here is the storm-



centre of social welfare and progress; this power it is, with its fascinating and baleful potencies, which in every age and clime needs the watchfulness and warning. No fact or tendency of life could be to him, or to any deeply reflecting mind, more palpable than this. From the crude old Homeric days of fierce barbaric passions, wherein

*The Idylle  
and the  
Ages*

"He saw two cities in a thousand boats  
All fighting for a woman on the sea,"

*Merlin and  
Ivigen, 559*

through the slow ages to his own time, a time in whose heart he still discerned how with the laggard growth of the higher realization of love there had kept even pace the creeping fires of illicit passion and cynic lawlessness and treacherous adulteries and cold divorce of hearts; nay, even to the jumbled and myopic sentiments of our latest civilization;—to his apprehensive mind this elemental affinity was the primal source from which the ultimate order must take its principle. It was virtually the same initium that Goethe recognized in society, when

"He took the suffering human race,  
He read each wound, each weakness clear;  
And struck his finger on the place,  
And said: Thou aildest here, and here!"

*Matthew  
Arnold  
Memorial  
Verses*

From this focal point it was, therefore, that the regeneration must come.

From the beginning of Tennyson's Arthur vision, while as yet his vast theme was drawing near shimmering and inchoate,

"First guessed by faint auroral flushes sent  
Along the wavering vista of his dream,"

*Lowell, Vision  
of Sir Launfal*

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

we have to reckon with his unqualifiedly poetical medium of realization. If adumbrations of the philosophy of it draws his brain, yet this *Ewig-Weibliche* it is which nucleates his unbidden fancy. He lays hold of his ideal, so to say, by the womanly side of it; and it is through the free play of a certain feminine susceptibility that he grows into his poetic maturity. As early as 1833 we begin to notice this. His first youthful incursion into Arthur-land, in *The Lady of Shalott*, played round one cardinal element, the power of love in the woman herself, as it wakes from vague revery to reality, becoming "half-sick of shadows," and absorbs her being to the yielding of life itself; a theme afterward elaborated to one of the deepest motives of the epic cycle, in the idyll of *Lancelot and Elaine*. Two focal points in the large issue of it next engage his fancy: the monumental closing scene of the *Morte D'Arthur*, wherein "the old order changeth, yielding place to new"; and the saintly element of *Sir Galahad*, wherein the might of the pure heart foreshadows the crisis of love and duty in *The Holy Grail*. But while thus these two outlining peaks of the epic situation were emerging from the nebulous landscape of his philosophy, it is interesting to note that his prescient fancy had seized on the most subtly portentous situation of all, that too unguarded scene in which *Guinevere* rides with *Lancelot*, through spring and flowers, to her marriage with *Arthur*. I refer to the fragment *Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, which portrays the incident to which

Tennyson's thought oftener reverts, perhaps, than to any other in the course of the Idylls, and which even in the holy house at Almesbury the hapless queen cannot let herself recall without growing "half-guilty in her thoughts again."

"Doch—alles was dazu mich trieb,  
Gott! war so gut! ach war so lieb!"

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Goethe  
Faust, Am  
Brunnen*

It is the point from which steals forth all the sweet woe of the poem, to spread insidiously and issue eventually in the ruin of the Order; the point of which yet we cannot think without the tender yet not rebellious feeling, "Oh, the pity of it!"

So much, then, had been touched upon and sketched before the first four Idylls of the King were given to the world; already, both poetically and philosophically, a fairly significant nucleus of the eventual epic outline. When, in 1858, these first Idylls were published, however, readers saw at the head of them not the king's name at all, nor that of any knight, but four women's names; as if subtly intimating that womanly lives were the vital centres and determinators of the whole fate of things. And this in Tennyson's mind was the hidden truth. These four women, Enid, Vivien, Elaine, and Guinevere, stand, so to say, at the four cardinal points of the spiritual compass. Two of them, the first two named, represent as it were the polar opposites, the zenith and nadir, of woman's love, as hallowing the conjugal state and as poisoning the insolence of illicit passion. This we know was in the poet's mind because,



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

as first printed and then withdrawn before publication, there were only these two poems entitled, Enid and Nimuë, The True and the False. Not to be too openly didactic, however, he suppressed the sub-title with the change of the second name from Nimuë to Vivien, and to the two poems added Elaine, in whom we read again love ministrant to the end and stronger than life, and Guinevere, in whom we read not the Rhadamanthine judgment of earthly cause and effect only but the beginnings of a purer love re-orient out of sin and ruin. Thus we cannot well call this first installment of the epic vaguely related or hap-hazard. In these Idylls the epic outline is already rough-hewn, as determined by the vital influence of woman-love. In these four poems, in truth, we have the heart of the epic.

One more Idyll there is of cardinal import, namely, The Holy Grail; which to the basal element of love as earthly passion adds, or rather brings out into articulation and relief, the crowning element of love and duty. This strand of the theme must needs be inwoven for completeness; for love touches not only the relations of earth but the holy aspirations of heaven. No other poem of such mystical strain was ever written by Tennyson; yet none so reveals his substratum of sound and saving good sense. Starting, like the other idylls, from the initial prompting of a woman, a nun with her ascetic holy dreams, and following out to its resultant "wandering fires" a half-insane spasm of superstition that invaded the Round Table,



the action portrays what comes when love glances off from its daily work and its conjugal bonds in the direction of a dreamy sublimated religion. In the fact that there is left of it all only vague disillusion and a lean and crippled Order, and in the fact that of the only one who succeeded in the quest, Galahad, the most that can be said is,

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

"And one hath had the vision face to face,  
And now his chair desires him here in vain,  
However they may crown him elsewhere,"

*The Holy  
Grail, 896*

we read how in his ripened meditation the poet resolves once for all his nobly conceived loyalty to love and duty. No other idyll, we are told, cost him so much thought, or was approached with such hesitant awe, as this. He felt in writing it that he was bringing his age's sacrest aspirations of religion into the arena of practical life and action, and that his words must be wisely chosen. One is inclined to call it the noblest idyll of all the series, the poem in which the poet's ideal attains its high-water mark and opens in its fulness earthward and heavenward.

In the same volume in which *The Holy Grail* appeared, published in 1869, were included also the idylls which begin and end the series, *The Coming of Arthur* and *The Passing of Arthur*, the latter enlarging the earliest written *Morte D'Arthur* and adjusting it to the completed epic scheme. By this time the poet's message is fairly well articulated. It would be deeply interesting if our present study permitted to run over the idylls subsequently added; but though,

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

in the light of the completed cycle, even richer in large suggestion than the first four, they are in a sense intercalary, being introduced for balance and concatenation, in the poet's endeavor to trace every vital aspect and shading of his theme. They reveal what has already been mentioned, the essentially scientific craving of his mind, that no link of his large demonstration be lost. Along with this quasi-scientific thoroughness goes also his artistic poetic sense; shown most strikingly, perhaps, in the way he makes the whole series conform to the advancing seasons of the year, from the early budding of springtime, when the season burgeons into green and flowers, onward steadily to the shortest and gloomiest day of winter, and the final note of season, which is the last line of the poem, —

*The Passing  
of Arthur, 468*

"And the new sun rose bringing the new year."

To every suggestion of the year's course, with its weathers and its aspects of nature, the sentiment of the epic, as in a providential framework, is exquisitely, not to say almost laboriously, fitted. We look at the poet toiling thus at the articulations of his vast vision, and we think of Browning's description of the obscure poet in *How it Strikes a Contemporary*:

*How it Strikes  
a Contemporary*

"Here had been, mark, the general-in-chief,  
Thro' a whole campaign of the world's life and death,  
Doing the King's work all the dim day long."

When we realize the final scope of it, and the meditation that has for half a century gone to the finished shaping, it is a truly engaging history of poetic creation.

### Assessment of Residual Values

**W**HAT now is the net result of all this, looking at the epic theme as a whole? In what large interest are these elusive threads of human love so carefully disentangled and followed out to their results in nature and spirit? Never was poem more minutely wrought and finished; never subject more sternly held to all its threads of involvement. Does the end crown the work?

The answer to this inquiry brings us to the real centre of the criticism that must be passed upon the Idylls; for they are by no means above it, nay, perhaps the criticism must be graver as their line of endeavor is more comprehensive and strenuous,—

"Quem si non tenuit, magnis tamen excidit ausis."

*Ovid, Metamor-  
phoses*

The world, reading the Idylls for the most part as detached stories of the Arthurian legend, has hitherto felt itself subjected to the marvellous magic of their poetic grace and beauty; and this aspect of the case has of course its own critical canons, potent as far as their jurisdiction extends. On this partial ground I myself have long delayed writing on them, in spite of a virtual promise made thirteen years ago to Lord Tennyson; in the somewhat vague feeling that the poems were over-meditated and over-elaborated, as if in carrying the subject



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

with him so many years the poet had let the fruit hang until it was a bit too ripe. An analogous criticism has been made, and is perhaps due, on the closest literary parallel to this long reflection, the second part of Goethe's *Faust*. Viewed, however, not as a mere collection of romantic stories but as the finished epic which the poet designed, this over-ripe fruitage assumes a quite different guise. The fault, if fault they have, lies, I am persuaded, in the scientific temper of presentation which the poet partly has in himself and has partly imbibed from the mind of his age. The care and conscience laid out on the exact motivation of events incurs the defect of its qualities. The subtle psychology of love and its unbalancing lawless rival is pursued almost to the excess of minuteness; every nuance is cut accurately to the line; until in the very wealth of the poet's realistic philosophy one's free poetic sense is at the point of protest, being a little unready to accept so complete marriage of imaginative delicacy and scientific thoroughness. And so, just as the same essential method makes *In Memoriam* appear morbid, it makes these poems seem over-refined, labored, the made article rather than the spontaneous. Surely, we say, seasons and weathers, motives and consequences, do not weave themselves so unerringly together in the real world. The finished work accordingly suffers on both sides. As single stories, the *Idylls* lack the limpidness of the real; they are too suggestive of a sweetly built demonstration, or if you please, of allegory. As a unitary epic tissue, to say nothing of the



hazardous device of constructing an esoteric action out of independent story elements, there is a lack of the epic sweep and vigor which belong to one powerfully conceived course of character and event. Perhaps the huge scope of the concept could not well have been filled out otherwise; at any rate, underlying it all is that scientific exaction which will not leave any aspect of the case undemonstrated.

When we get below questions of method, we must admit, I think, that the thesis of the epic resolves itself into something not greatly unlike a sermon. There is, after all, considerable justice in the reproach that Arthur talks like a curate. In harmony with the poet's whole temperament, the work is a plea for law, order, regulated conservatism. It is concerned with no revolutionary propaganda or bold uprising of spirit as Browning was, but rather with keeping the wholesome restraints of religion and duty and sound sentiment intact. Its ideal manhood must pay homage to these, ignoring nothing, perverting nothing. To this end the poet stations himself at the point where love is most purely a passion, where current romance is so gaily at play, where shifting sentiment is so myopic and heedless; and from here he patiently traces all the tendencies, perils, vagaries, aberrations, which a scientist of the matter must note; but always with an austere sense of the tremendous issues involved, and with a tempering balancing aim, drawing upward to the highest spiritual ideals and values.

So spiritual an ideal, urged baldly and pre-

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Gareth and  
Lynette, 203*

*Balin and  
Salan, 151*

ceptively, would inevitably encounter the inertia and remonstrance of the worldly-minded, the rebellious, the unspiritual. And indeed Tennyson is aware that he is cutting across their grain, that his ideal, while the only tenable one for true manhood, is too transcendent for direct practical appeal. As the worldly-wise Merlin puts it to Gareth:

"so thou pass  
Beneath this archway, then wilt thou become  
A thrall to his enchantments, for the King  
Will bind thee by such vows as is a shame  
A man should not be bound by, yet the which  
No man can keep."

His artistic problem, if we may so define it, is to induce the mass of readers who so need the steadying influence of his message to pass beneath the gateway and take the high vows of life; nor is he insensible to the sneers and deprecations that are sure to rise, both outside and within the gates of the ideal. And indeed no phase of objection or ridicule or contempt, in that campaign of "sense at war with soul" which the poet says is here shadowed, escapes his sharp ken. If the perverse heart kicks against it, he shows as accurately as any objector just why and how the kick comes in; it is a part of his keen spiritual insight. From the approving words of Merlin, just quoted, down to the point where Balin,

"Tore from the branch and cast on earth, the shield,  
Drove his mail'd heel athwart the royal crown,"

every sneer or remonstrance or defiance is anticipated. Yet high above all the duty and

the vision exist, must exist whether men will hear or forbear; though blurred and sinned against yet unmarred by contempt or perversity. The world must not let them die.

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

In fact, he has embarked upon a theme which in the religious evolution of the ages has become a truism; its universality and obviousness have made it so. It is such a theme as a man like Tennyson, with a heritage of clerical tradition reënforced by poetical and prophetic sensitiveness, might be expected to urge. But as he well knows, such a theme cannot make its way by preaching. One touch of the didactic, one plea of the sermonizer, would hopelessly flat the note, staling it to that stock subject of pulpiteers, how good it is to be good. One of the most palpable endeavors of his whole poetic career is to keep his thought in the note of pure poetry, and eliminate the didactic and dialectic. We have observed with what delicate reticence he expunged even so slight a didactic suggestion as is conveyed by that sub-title "the true and the false," as between Enid and Nimuë, and how when he published the Idylls he left his readers to find this out for themselves. One notes the same careful avoidance in such a portrayal as *The Vision of Sin*, where a preacher's plea is embodied in terms of pure spiritual description. A still more striking instance appears in his first long poem, *The Princess*; which was concerned, of all things in the world, with the subject of woman's education. The composition of this poem seems to reveal, so to say, his laboratory, wherein he was working out the



*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

problem how to convey a vital philosophic truth to the heart; and we are aware through what a "strange diagonal" of form and plot, and with what prentice ear-marks, he managed, or at least conscientiously tried, to convey an essentially prosaic theme poetically.

How then shall this epic theme, well-nigh as prosaic as the other, be made viable, in an age that so sorely needs its wisdom and vital thrust? Tennyson had struck the note by which he became "England's voice for half a century," and to him the trust was sacred. If, as he recognizes,

*In Memoriam  
xxxvi. 2*

"truth embodied in a tale  
Shall enter in at lowly doors,"

and if, in George Herbert's words,

*Herbert, The  
Church Porch*

"A verse may find him, who a Sermon flies,  
And turn delight into a Sacrifice,"

then his artistic way is marked out for him in the free play of his poetic nature. By the way of charming tale, by the way of captivating conciliating verse, from the poet whom they have come to idolize, his listeners shall be found and sweetly led. If in poetry they have become a race of lotos eaters, lotos they shall have. And so the theme of ideal manhood with its conservation of law and order, is laid upon them not trenchantly and exactingly, but as a reverberating music, an enveloping atmosphere, a pervading tone of things, an imaginative world ordered and proportioned. One feels the influence as soon as one enters; it is all around him, streaming in the breeze, pulsating in season and weather. His very senses advise him whether,



as in Gareth and Lynette, he is moving where the youthful standards of life are tonic and true, or, as in Merlin and Vivien, the hot midsummer air is charged with thunder and cynic lust, or, as in The Last Tournament, he is moving through an autumn season of falseness and decaying vows and moral rottenness. Thus the consummate art of the cycle labors untiringly in the interest of such a sweet unspoken power as for a time wrought on Sir Balin, and but for the subtle encroachments of baser sense might to the end have wrought on all the Table Round:

“and all the world  
Made music, and he felt his being move  
In music with his Order and the King.”

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Balin and  
Balan, 206*

How otherwise, we ask as we have already asked, could such a theme, so austere because so high, have been made a commanding and restraining power on the mind of a too heedless and drifting generation?

But new times are upon us, new issues, new emphasis of things; so that the last-century epic, so fitted to its day, comes to us not unlike

“That story which the bold Sir Bedivere . . .  
Told, when the man was no more than a voice  
In the white winter of his age, to those  
With whom he dwelt, new faces, other minds.”

*The Passing of  
Arthur, 1*

Does the music of it still carry and reverberate as of old? Are the values that we have found permanent values?

As for the theme, with its moral upshot of duty, its plea for the eternal sacredness of love and law, its tender unveiling of the spiritual

*The Idylls  
and the  
Ages*

*Malory, Morte  
D'Arthur, xxi. 7*

perils with which society so heedlessly plays, it can no more die than can Arthur. It stands there majestic, like God's awful rose of dawn; and though it may long be unheeded or eclipsed, in men's chase after the new fancy of the hour, yet the onset of chastisement and conscience, which is due to visit every generation, when like Guinevere men wake to the wisdom of things as they are designed in heaven, will reveal its pure severity of perfect light. Malory's epitaph of Arthur,

"Hic jacet Arthurus Rex, quondam Rex que futurus,"

is the announcement not of death but of resurrection, or rather of perpetuity; and with Arthur comes again, for us, all that Tennyson has so nobly made Arthur mean. The king can never again be to the world what he was before our poets saw in him ideal manhood closed in real man and made him the conscience of an imperilled social order. Nor, we may be confident, can the music of this characteristic modern epic die into oblivion, its consummate art going for nothing, any more than can the music of Spenser and Milton. Men will return to it again and again from their newer vogues, as to a symphony of Beethoven, as to a time-hallowed choral song; will bathe wearied nerves and tastes anew in it, as it were in the warmth and beauty of the eternal prophecy, the city yet to be:

*Baretti and  
Lynette, 271*

"For an ye heard a music, like enow  
They are building still, seeing the city is built  
To music, therefore never built at all,  
And therefore built for ever."

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